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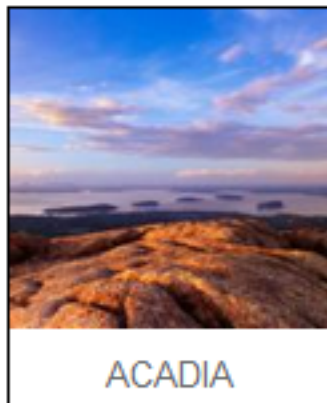
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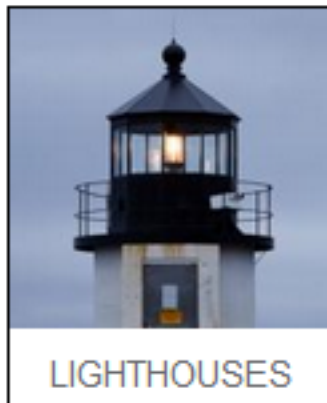
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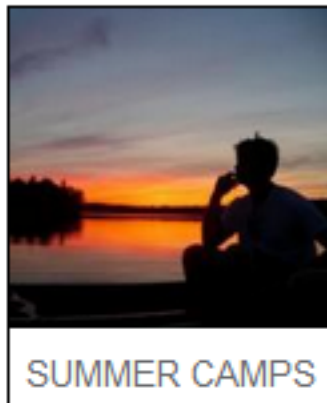
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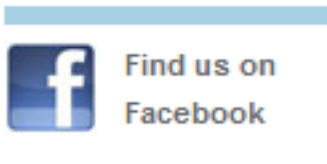
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My Life in Lincolnville

2012 Midcoast Travel Features

After two decades of life in this Camden Hills hamlet, a resident reflects on the town, the people, and the place she calls home

By Elizabeth Hand
Photograph by Amy Wilton

It might have been the promise of a certain kind of magic that initially drew me here, in particular the preternatural beauty of the Maine archipelago and the eerie clarity of the twilight in the days around the summer solstice. Yet it wasn't magic that kept me here. It's the far more earthly — okay, gritty — character of the coastal town where I've lived since 1988, a place whose outstanding physical beauty is matched only by the feistiness and independence of many of its residents.

The novelist Paul Bowles in his autobiography, *Without Stopping*, wrote "Always without formulating the concept, I had based my sense of being in the world partly on an unreasoned conviction that certain areas of the earth's surface contained more magic than others."

It's a conviction I suspect many others share, in particular those of us from away who have made Maine our home. I moved here twenty-four years ago, from Washington, D.C., when I bought a rundown, three-hundred-square foot lakefront camp with no running water or indoor plumbing. I wasn't a back-to-the-lander or nouveau hippie: I was a struggling writer with very little money. The down payment for the camp was a small advance from my first novel, and my monthly mortgage check was a third of what my former partner and I had been paying to rent a charming Carpenter Gothic in Rockport village, the Disney version of midcoast Maine.

Our daughter was born three weeks after we moved in. The only source of heat was an ancient parlor woodstove. We had no firewood. I can vividly recall a beautiful sunny morning in early June when I looked around the one-room structure and for the first time thought, How am I going to heat this place and keep a baby warm in the winter?

"We were all wondering that, too," one of my friends here in town remarked when I told him this, years later.

Somehow, we got by: with help from friends and neighbors, neighbors who became friends, and people whose names I never knew. From them I learned how to feed a woodstove and stack wood; how to use a composting toilet; how much water one actually needs to get through a day (not as much as you think); how to furnish a home from yard sales and the Swap Shop at the dump; how to use ashes from the woodstove in lieu of salt on an icy path; how to cane a chair (not very well). In a nutshell, I learned how to make do with very little and, as things gradually got easier, to be more discerning about what came home from the dump.



None of these were skills I'd brought with me from Washington, D.C. Many of them were second or third nature to folks who had been here longer than I had — some of them *much longer*. Thousands of years ago, native peoples set up weirs at the mouth of the Ducktrap, a river whose earliest use gave it the name it still bears (and shares with various local businesses). In 1770, the first permanent settlement in what was then known as the Plantation of Canaan and Ducktrap was established by Nathan Knight. His descendants still hold an annual reunion each November. Along with the Knights, other long-established families have given their names to roads and streams in town. I started to list some of these here, but there are so many, I was afraid I'd leave someone out.

But you get the picture. This is a small town (population 2,042) with only one or two degrees of separation between residents; a place whose exposed roots go deep. You can still see the ruins of once-thriving local industries — lime quarries and kilns; gravel pits; the mule-drawn railway that ran from Coleman Pond to Ducktrap.

"There's a mystery to this town," says Lincolnville's official historian, Diane O'Brien. "There's a little girl's grave in the middle of the woods, old roads, and the ruins of houses. The Old Settler's Cemetery, what they call the First Cemetery, is supposedly on top of an ancient Indian burial ground."

This secret history is hidden within the sprawling forest that's grown up and around and over the homesteads, farms, and roads that once traversed the thirty-nine square miles that comprise Lincolnville, much of it now undeveloped. By a rough estimate, more than 40 percent of the town is either owned by the state, local, or federal government, or in a tax use program that sets it aside for farmland, tree growth, or open space. Some of the most well-known features of Camden Hills State Park — including Bald Rock, Cameron Mountain, the Millerite Ledges, the 940-acre Tanglewood forest and 4-H Camp, and much of Lake Megunticook — are actually in Lincolnville. So is most of the Fernalds Neck Preserve and the Ducktrap River Preserve, both part of Coastal Mountains Land Trust. At 1,135 acres, Ducktrap is the Land Trust's largest tract set aside to be forever wild, and one of only eight rivers in the country where wild Atlantic salmon spawn. Eighty-three percent of the river's corridor is now protected. All of it is in Lincolnville.

The forever wild designation isn't just talk. Residents have sighted mountain lions here; in 1996 I saw a gray wolf, a few weeks before one was killed in Ellsworth, fifty miles away, but well within a wolf's hunting range. Moose, bobcats, coyotes, mink, bald eagles, and other Maine wildlife are common. Back when the Center General Store was open, its door was plastered with Missing Cat posters, testament to the active proximity of fishers.

What's remarkable about the existence of so much wild space is that Lincolnville is nestled on Penobscot Bay between Camden and Belfast, in the heart of the heavily toured and developed midcoast. Lincolnville draws more than its share of visitors, to well-known eateries such as the Lobster Pound restaurant, Whale's Tooth pub, Chez Michel, and McLaughlin's Lobster Shack — all at Lincolnville Beach, where you can also catch the ferry to Islesboro. A few miles inland, there's the Cellardoor Winery and the Youngtown Inn.

Rural economies continue to hang on, too: agriculture, lobstering, timber, carpentry, boatbuilding, weaving. As in the rest of Maine, numerous craftsmen and artisans live and work here. Some of them are legacies of the 1970s back-to-the-land movement; others learned their skills from parents or grandparents. Inevitably there are artists — photographer Rudy Burckhardt (sharing a border with Searsmont); painters and sculptors like Alex Katz, Neil Welliver, Red Grooms, Yvonne Jacquette, Lois Dodd, Kathy Porter; writers like Kate Braestrup, Diane O'Brien, K. Stephens, Richard Grant, and Ruth Sawyer, whose autobiographical novel, *The Year of Jubilo*, a classic of making do, is set in the rambling house that is now a B-&B near Lincolnville Beach.

Such a disparate group is not without its divisions: income, education, age, religious and political beliefs, any of which can become polarizing, especially in times of economic stress. Yet even when these differences can seem most extreme, the town has taken care of its own. On October 22, 1844, a group of townspeople, members of the Millerite sect, climbed Megunticook Mountain to await the end of the world and the Second Coming. Unsurprisingly, when dawn broke, the world remained untouched, an event now known as the Great Disappointment. But it was the world the Millerites were unprepared to live in. Expecting the apocalypse, they hadn't put by food or other resources for the coming winter. So other Lincolnville residents took them in, or shared what they had to help them survive the bleak months ahead.

During the last century, neighbors sustained each other through the long hard years of the Great Depression. When the Tranquility Grange burned down, townspeople rebuilt it. When it burned down a second, and then a third time, they rebuilt it again — and again. In similar fashion, when in May 2000 the Lincolnville Elementary School was abruptly closed due to a mold infestation, the school set up temporary headquarters in a building provided by former credit card giant MBNA at the corporate campus on Ducktrap Mountain. Three years later, Lincolnville Central School moved into a newly constructed building on the same site as the old one.

History continues to repeat itself in the current revitalization of Lincolnville Center, where I moved in 1999. The center has suffered through its own share of recent hard times with the loss or closure of landmarks like Dean & Eugley's Garage, the old Volunteer Fire Station, and the Lincolnville General Store. Last year I stood up at Town Meeting and observed that, from the front of my house, I could see seven vacant buildings, including the general store.

This year, that vista has changed somewhat, sparked by a trend toward community activism that's been building for several years. The blue eyesore by Petunia Pump has been torn down, leaving a small field. Another long-empty building was razed as well. The general store is under new ownership and undergoing extensive renovation, with hopes of seeing it open later this year. The one-time antique store still fondly known as Grampa Hall's Place is now owned by the same folks who bought the general store. It's the site of Lincolnville's fledgling but busy farmer's market, as well as temporary quarters for the Lincolnville Library, another recent addition to the town.

Just down the road, the building that once housed the fire station is now owned by the Lincolnville Boat Club, which offers sailing lessons on Norton Pond, a stone's throw away, along with educational events in its new home. Beside it stands the Center's original one-room schoolhouse, also purchased by the Boat Club, then given to the Lincolnville Historical Society.

Erected in the 1880s and active until 1947, the schoolhouse is now the object of Move It! A campaign spearheaded by the Lincolnville Historical Society and supported by the recently formed Lincolnville Community Alliance, Move It! aims to, yes, move the old schoolhouse directly across the road, onto the empty lot that once housed Dean & Eugley's, where it will eventually house the town library and displays from the historical society's collection.

This combination of honoring tradition while employing outside-the-box thinking continues to characterize the town, from the twentieth into the twenty-first century. Every October on the anniversary of the Great Disappointment, Rosey Gerry (who traces his Lincolnville heritage back to the 1870s) leads a dawn walk to the Millerite Ledges, now part of Camden Hills State Park. In 1999, twenty-seven locals accompanied Gerry — on foot — as he led them from the mouth of the Ducktrap River to the state capital, forty-three miles inland. The walk took two days (and wore out many pairs of shoes) as the group crossed main roads, fields, and heavily forested woodland, following the lost trail of what had been the Old Augusta Road.

There are other links to the town's past, distant and not-so. The Lincolnville Band, started in 1870, numbers several members descended from its original founders, and still plays in local parades and Tuesday night summer concerts at Norton Pond. Every December during Christmas by the Sea, townsfolk gather for a bonfire at Lincolnville Beach, then convene at the nearby Lincolnville Improvement Association building for a Christmas party organized by volunteers (assisted by Santa and Mrs. Claus). In addition to the Christmas party, each summer there's the Blueberry Wing Ding at the Beach, and the Strawberry Festival and parade in the Center. (One thing everyone in town agrees on is dessert: pie buys and bean suppers are among the most popular and reliable fundraisers.)

Then there's Lincolnville's online bulletin board, begun as a means of communicating news that in the past might have been exchanged at the general store. Lost cats and yard sales; advice on organic gardening and where to buy firewood; a list of what's available this week at the farmer's market; and a general clearing-house for goodwill and good ideas — the bulletin board has taken the community's can-do ethic into cyberspace.

For this article, I asked folks on the bulletin board to define our town in a single word. Here are some responses: quirky, organic, lively, feisty, spirit, abundance, compassionate, community, schizophrenic, independent-minded, welcoming, alive, bountiful, classy, innovative. A number of people said "home." David Kinney, town administrator for the last nine years, summed it up as "genuine."

All of which are dead-on, while still failing to convey exactly what it is about Lincolnville that makes it special. Tom Sadowski, a transplant from Alaska who's lived here since 1991, confronted this in the lead-up to the town's bicentennial in 2002, when he was the sole (and frequent) entrant in a contest to create a town seal and motto. A few of his slogans:

Lincolnville: not fancy, but it's home!
You got your beach . . . you got your center . . . and you've got your outlying areas
Lincolnville: just right
Just south of liberty, a little bit beyond hope (referring to our neighboring towns)
Lincolnville: not a complicated community

And my favorite:
Lincolnville, Maine: each to the tune of his own drummer: independent-minded for 200 years

A more generic seal was ultimately chosen to represent the town, but Lincolnville's freethinking, occasionally contrarian spirit remains undiluted. Out of 1,690 voters, Lincolnville has 580 Democrats, 431 Republicans, 90 Green Independents, and 589 unenrolled. It's those unenrolled voters who, to me, seem emblematic of the town: folks who at the last minute could go either way — or maybe, go some other way that nobody, nobody, could possibly foresee.

Like them, Lincolnville continually confounds my expectations. And that's why I live here.

Elizabeth Hand's most recent novels are *Available Dark* and *Radiant Days*.

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